KPCC-FM Radio
Larry Mantle's AirTalk
August 10, 2005
10:00 AM - 11:00 AM
Pasadena, California

LARRY MANTLE, host:

Well, we've heard of the Big Dig in Boston, which has gone over its original cost estimates by about 100 percent, and there have been a variety of tunneling projects that have been highly successful, such as the Chunnel allowing trains to travel between the continental Europe and Britain. Those trains have been extremely popular and have cut-down significantly on the ferryboat as well as air travel between the continent and the British Isles.

We're going to talk about whether such technology might be employed here in Los Angeles, specifically in the missing link of the Long Beach Freeway, the 710, which ends at this point, right as you arrive into Alhambra at its northernmost point, and then there's a brief stub of the 710 Freeway between the 210 in Pasadena and terminus a few blocks south at California Boulevard.

What if that approximately six miles could be filled-in with a tunnel? This would potentially appease South Pasadena residents who for decades have fought construction of the remaining portion of the 710 Freeway, which would decimate thousands of homes in that community and lead to the uprooting of thousands of trees.

South Pasadena, through a series of lawsuits as well as political lobbying, has successfully fought-off the completion of the 710 Freeway. However, that means that neighboring cities of Alhambra and the El Sereno portion of Los Angeles have had far heavier street traffic than they would've otherwise, and they've not been particularly happy that the freeway has not been finished.

Well, with $2.4 million now earmarked in the federal highway bill signed this morning by President Bush for a study of such a tunneling concept, we thought we'd ask you what you think. Is this the solution, the thing that could bridge the difference between those proposing the freeway be completed and those who have been fighting it because of what they say are the quality-of-life and environmental harms such freeway construction would bring? We're at 866-893-KPCC. That's 866-893-5722.

One of the proposals- one of the studies, I should say, of this proposal says it would cost about $2 billion for an approximately five-mile-long tunnel. Now, this is a bit over what it's projected it would cost to build an aboveground freeway through that portion where the 710 is not built. However, that doesn't necessarily take into account what Caltrans would raise from selling all the property that it's acquired in the path of the freeway. Caltrans a few decades ago bought-up the properties so that they could potentially finish the 710. Although that property has been rented-out to people on a long-term basis, if that property could be sold at fair-market value, the state could recoup a significant portion of the cost.

* * *

MANTLE: This is a very complex issue, because you not only have the interests of each of the cities through which this missing portion of the 710 Freeway would go, but you also have regional implications to transportation of goods, also passenger travel throughout Southern California, which in many cases is impeded because of the missing portion of the 710. And to talk with us about it from a regional perspective is the executive director of the Southern California Association of Governments, Mark Pisano.

Thanks very much, Mark, for joining us.

Mr. MARK PISANO (Southern California Association of Governments): Larry, it's a pleasure being with you.

MANTLE: You support this possibility if it is affordable and technologically feasible?

Mr. PISANO: Larry, our organization, which prepares the regional transportation plan, has supported completing this link for many decades. The issue has been thwarted because of the impact that it has on communities, particularly the community of South Pasadena, but also Pasadena, and it also has implications on Alhambra immediately.

For those reasons, several years ago we explored the possibility of an alternative that would tunnel the closure of the gap. And it's important to note for the listeners that you have a portion of the freeway constructed north of the 10 Freeway about a half a mile to three-quarters of a mile, and the same thing on the other side, and then you have this gap between the two.

What happens now is that the freeway from both of those- I mean the traffic from both of those extensions, they'll travel through the various communities, and that's why you have a number of the communities, particularly Alhambra, that has fought to complete the link.

MANTLE: We'll continue our conversation, talk about some of the new methods of technology that could be used for boring a tunnel under the cities of South Pasadena, a portion of Pasadena and Alhambra to complete the missing portion of the Long Beach 710 Freeway. Where would the money come from to do this? We'll talk about that as we continue.

* * *

MANTLE: What do you think about a possible tunnel under South Pasadena, portions of Alhambra and Pasadena to close the missing portion of the Long Beach Freeway? This is something that many Southern Californians have wanted to see happen, the closing of that missing portion, so that you don't have to go around the missing link. However, people, particularly from the community of South Pasadena, are dead-set against finishing it, at least aboveground, because of what they see as the very, very negative impact on their community. We're at 866-893-KPCC. We're talking with Mark Pisano, executive director of the Southern California Association of Governments.

Mark, what about the new technologies that are touted for doing this? Has the technology advanced to the point that this really is both technologically feasible to do something that's quite a bit longer than even Boston's Big Dig and affordable?

Mr. PISANO: Larry, the utilization of the technology in the construction of these types of facilities has been- been underway in Europe for, oh, the last decade, and that's where these technologies have been refined and the cost has been reduced. In fact, they've been reduced fairly significantly.

We have used these technologies for smaller projects, both in transportation and in water supply, over the last decade, so it's not like we haven't used this approach here in the States. We have.

This would be the most extensive application in the area of transportation. Work that we did several years ago indicated that it would be feasible, and, furthermore, given the extreme- the- the high cost of housing and taking of land, it's now becoming competitive with a let's call it aboveground approach. So...

MANTLE: Well, you-

Mr. PISANO: ... it's both been technologically feasible. It's becoming now financially feasible, and MTA has in building some of their subways has really explored these technologies, and both they and Caltrans feel that there's enough feasibility that they're currently spending their own resources to do so, and Congressman Schiff got additional resources to-

MANTLE: I would be concerned about whether the cost, though, would snowball. We saw with the Big Dig that the estimate just was way inadequate. They had all kinds of engineering challenges, as I understand it, to try and complete that project.

And the- are you concerned at all that even after a study is done and you get a price that is estimated that the thing could still spiral out of control once you start digging?

Mr. PISANO: Well, Larry, to deal with that issue and also to deal with another issue, namely financing, we more than likely are going to need to, let's say, procure this under a different framework, namely a design-build-operate structure in which those risks are borne by a private-sector party. And we can structure the way we proceed on this such that it can be done.

We're using this approach in a number of projects, and let me be specific. We used this approach on the Alameda Corridor, in which that kind of an arrangement was structured, and therefore the cost- the project came in on-time and it came in under-budget. Now-

MANTLE: The Gold Line also used design-build, didn't it?

Mr. PISANO: That- yes, it did. So, we're learning how to build these things such that we don't run into the kinds of problems they ran into in the Big Dig. Those are real issues,...

MANTLE: OK.

Mr. PISANO: ...and therefore if we can't structure it that way, that's a- I mean, that's a real consideration, but we think we can.